

Canada
The Canada Council
Conseil des Arts du Canada

Statements and speeches

The Canada Council: The
Principle of Excellence
and Its Implications in
a Democratic Society

Notes for an Address to the
Annual Management Development
Program,
Harvard University Institute
in Arts Administration,
Cambridge, Massachusetts

July 6, 1977

By Charles Lussier, Director
The Canada Council

The Canada Council: The Principle of Excellence and Its
Implications in a Democratic Society

I should like to thank Mr. Douglas Schwalbe for giving me this opportunity to speak to you about a subject that lies close to our hearts at the Canada Council this year. For it is our 20th anniversary, a veritable coming of age, with its attendant introspection and stock-taking.

As inspiration for this talk I have taken the words of the great Czech statesman Eduard Benes, who expressed so clearly what I shall be trying to convey this afternoon. "To be a democrat," he said, "is to believe that all men have a soul."

First, some history. It was on March 28, 1957, that the Parliament of Canada brought into being a "Council for the encouragement of the arts, humanities and social sciences," better known by its short name, "Canada Council."

The new organization was created through a democratic process which had its beginnings during the Second World War. By 1944 the Canadian government was concerning itself about the incipient social changes arising out of the aspirations of returning service men and women and the massive waves of immigrants -- all caught up in the euphoria of peace after the hard years of war. It therefore set up a committee to plan for the postwar period. The committee apparently was preparing to deal with everything under the sun -- except that it had given no thought to the place of the arts in the Canada of the future! The artists of Canada were quick to react, however,

and in an unprecedented gesture, they marched on Parliament and submitted what they called The Artists' Brief. The committee met with the artists and duly took note of their request, which was to create a federal body devoted to the cause of the arts.

A direct effect of this historic march on Parliament was the government's establishment, five years later in 1949, of a Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences, commonly called the Massey Commission after its chairman the Right Honorable Vincent Massey. (I should perhaps note here that our government commissions in Canada are traditionally called "royal" because of our monarchic constitutional setup.)

The Massey Commission sat for two years and consulted widely across our vast country. At the end of its mandate, the Commission submitted its now famous Massey Report -- which presented a sweeping view, as its writers put it, of "our cultural landscape," and an impressive series of recommendations. The most radical of these recommendations concerned the creation by the state of a body to be known as the "Canada Council for the Encouragement of the Arts, Letters, Humanities and Social Sciences." It was to be six years, however, before the necessary funds were found to set up this organization and to make it a legally constituted body under an Act of Parliament.

It has been noted many times that the Massey Report provided the Canada Council with its fundamental philosophy. In this our anniversary year, it seems to me that it is

important to specify precisely what that philosophy is. Briefly, the authors of the Report stated that the "common good" of the Canadian people cannot be considered only in material terms: it must also include the concept of what they called "spiritual resources," which are less tangible but of unquestioned importance. Because these resources transcend pure utility and are essential in themselves, they may "serve to inspire a nation's devotion," the Report stated, "and to prompt a people's action." The authors saw the health of our spiritual lives as essential to our vitality and uniqueness as a nation, to our stature in the eyes of other countries, and to the unity of Canada itself.

In their description of these essential cultural elements the authors of the Report designated, on the one hand, the humanities and social sciences, and on the other, the creative arts: music, theatre, ballet, painting, sculpture, architecture and town planning, literature, folklore, handicrafts, and indigenous people's art. In drawing on the mass of evidence they had received, the authors could see that those activities necessary to achieving the common good were suffering from a grave lack of nourishment. For all that, however, they did not see themselves as suggesting standards of taste from some "cultural stratosphere." They expressed the hope that there would be a widening opportunity for the Canadian public to enjoy works of genuine merit in all fields. The tone of the next statement in their Report is unequivocal (and I

add my own emphasis here). The authors, in stating that "The best must be made available to those who wish it," were in fact subscribing to the principle that the entire community should have an opportunity to progress towards excellence. Finally, they concluded with what a philosopher would deem prudent political judgment: they stated that to prevail and grow, these spiritual resources must receive assistance from the State (of an order yet to be determined). Such assistance is legitimate, they said, by virtue of the fact that the State bears prime responsibility for the common good, and, for some problems at least, is the only possible source of aid.

What are these problems? The authors of the Report outline them thus: "vast distances, a scattered population, our youth as a nation, easy dependence on a huge and generous neighbor. But while we are engaged in these material matters," they wrote, "we are confronted with new problems which we share with all modern states... The tidal wave of technology can be more damaging to us than to countries with older cultural traditions possessing firmer bulwarks against these contemporary perils."

I can't help but hear an echo of the philosopher Henri Bergson of my youth, invoking a "spiritual supplement" for democracy, in these times of enormous technological achievement. Nearer to home, I also hear the voice of John Kenneth Galbraith -- that eminent thinker who belongs to both of our countries. "There is no reason," Galbraith

says, "to suppose that scientific and engineering achievements serve the ultimate frontiers in human enjoyment... The opportunities for enjoyment from artistic development have no visible limit; they are almost certainly greater than those from technical development... An extensive and expanding sponsorship and support of the arts is not only a normal but an essential function of the modern state." The authors of the Massey Report were well aware of the dangers of bureaucratic control or of political interference, of stifling efforts which must spring from the desires of the people themselves. They thus opted for a quasi-public body, independent of political control. And they relied on the competence and wisdom of the members of the organization to administer the public funds in accordance with the real needs of the country.

To define a principle, even in writing, is not easy, especially when it is a question of making the highest levels of art and learning accessible to the general public. And to work out the day-to-day administrative details demanded by such an ideal constitutes a permanent challenge. The difficulty stems from the fact that we are not administering inert objects that can be manipulated with impunity; we are dealing with human life itself, in its dual esthetic and rational dimensions, its system of organic interaction, and all the potential enclosed in each one of its moments. A work of art is a work of man, who creates or recreates it, grasps the moment of beauty and interprets it. A work of

science is also a work of man, who sheds some new light on the enigmas of nature or the mystery of the human condition, and makes use of this increased illumination to enrich the truth of his existence.

The first group of 21 members who constituted the Canada Council were not a group of bureaucrats, nor have they been since. Suffused with the philosophy of the Massey Report, and fully aware of the difficulties in applying it, this group of pioneers attacked their problems with all the fervor of a philosopher (having tasted of Hegel) treating dialectics! Briefly, the Council simply set out to subsidize excellence -- that is, to work toward a kind of a synthesis of quantity and quality, without attempting to dictate standards of beauty or criteria of truth. Like the Massey Commission which conceived it, and in the same democratic spirit, it consulted the largest possible number of experts prominent in the artistic and scholarly world. In spite of the wisdom of the views it thus obtained, the Council of course did not succeed at the time (any more than it has been able to since!) in achieving the ideal synthesis, partly because its resources always remained short of the demands of quality.

However, the open dialogue in which it was engaged with the community did permit the Council to establish, right at the outset, the foundation on which it would build little by little, the main structures through which the principle of excellence could be translated into policies and administrative

practices geared to "real public need," as the Massey Report put it.

To deal first with the policy level, in December 1957, the Council convened a conference in Kingston which brought together representatives of theatre, music, writing, and the visual arts. Six months earlier, the Council had met with 26 learned societies, in conference at the University of Ottawa. One can see in these meetings the models of the two Advisory Panels the Council has today -- one for the arts and one for the humanities and social sciences. The two advisory groups, like the Council itself, are made up of people recruited from many regions across the country and recognized for their competence in the arts or the scholarly disciplines.

The general policies adopted by the Council on the advice of these two Advisory Panels have resulted in the development of a wide range of awards and grants, given on the recommendations of juries or selection committees. The tested principle of judgment by one's peers governs the work of the juries and committees, and a system of constant turnover of members helps to lessen the risks of conflict of interest or the domination of cliques. The persistent financial constraints under which we work demand that we apply the principle of peer judgment rigorously, which is in fact the daily application, as we see it, of

the principle of excellence in the service of the community. I should add here that the Council publishes a complete list of its grants in its annual report to Parliament, thus exposing itself to the instruments of control that our democratic societies have forged and which we in Canada have learned to use without too much timidity!

One cannot really celebrate an anniversary without going through the ritual of presenting a balance sheet. I shall spare you a detailed accounting, however, and limit myself to an over-all view. Not wanting to appear to be a judge in my own case, I shall base my opinions less on my personal views than on convictions that I know are largely shared by my fellow citizens.

Canadians have given credit to the Canada Council for the preeminent role it has played in the improvement of the artist's lot over the past 20 years: for the creation from sea to sea of a network of year-round professional artistic companies, and for the development of a body of full-time professional artists. Canadians have also expressed appreciation for certain innovative measures the Council has conceived to help bring artists and their works closer to people, and to stimulate artistic life far from the large urban centres. I am thinking of our Art Bank and Touring Office, and of our more modest programs of artists-in-residence; public readings, by authors, of their own works; or the distribution of Canadian books free of charge to groups that otherwise could not afford to buy them.

I think we are justified in suggesting that the arts have attained a vigorous state of health in Canada, a degree of excellence on a par with many other countries. As the Canadian scholar and critic Northrop Frye said at a recent symposium in Washington on Canadian culture in the twentieth century, "It is of immense importance to the world that a country that used to be at the edge of the earth and is now a kind of global Switzerland surrounded by all the world's great powers should have achieved the repatriating of its culture. For this is essentially what has happened in the last twenty years, in all parts of Canada, and what was once an inarticulate space on a map is now responding to the world with the tongues and eyes of a matured and disciplined imagination."

In the field of the humanities and social sciences, the work of the Canada Council is inseparable from the history of the universities in the last two decades. The Massey Report had recommended that a gigantic "catching up operation" be undertaken for the universities. Accordingly, between 1957 and 1968, the Council devoted almost \$70 million toward the construction of university buildings for the use of the humanities and social sciences. On another level, the Council contributed funds for indispensable working tools, such as Canadian scholarly journals and collections of specialized books from everywhere. But at the start it was the individual researcher to whom the Council gave most of its grants. It set up in 1957 two large programs that it still administers: one for the training of researchers,

and another for the conduct of research at various levels.

Another important step, begun in 1970, was to clarify and improve things that had of necessity been improvised. This task is being carried out in collaboration with the universities, and in 1972 the Council instituted a program of negotiated grants for concerted, interdisciplinary research. The aim was to encourage the formation of research centres of excellence devoted to the study of large-scale regional or national problems. At the same time, the Council developed its program of publishing grants for major editorial projects, of virtually universal interest in the scholarly world today. As we look critically at this work, we are faced with an endless array of questions -- such as the possibility of developing more rigorous methods of evaluating research proposals, the coordination of the many individual research projects, the relevance of the research, its social implications, and the contribution of the new scientific knowledge to Canadian life.

The purpose underlying all of this work in the Council has been the persistent and careful nurturing of independent research. Last year in its annual report the Council quoted Professor Donald Rowat, who said: "The university is one of the few islands left where thinking people are free to probe and question society's conventional wisdom." Professor Rowat expresses the conviction that has nourished the richest values of our society in

the scholarly study of what the Massey Report calls "the whole of human life." The Council pleads the cause of the university at a time when it appears to be undergoing multiple crises -- of finance, insecurity and credibility. That such crises will alter the image of the university is probably inevitable. But the university's basic mission will not change -- which is to continuously discern and illuminate the values that are the marks of our membership in the race of free men. If the Council acts as an advocate on behalf of the university, it is because the Council itself wishes to protect the unique way in which the university serves the community through the promotion of intellectual and spiritual values.

I have thought it useful in this talk first to show the origins of the Council's philosophy of excellence, in light of the directions of the Massey Report. Now I shall try briefly to place this philosophy in the context of a relatively new concept we are struggling with at present -- that is, the "democratization of culture." As you know, under the influence of Unesco and the Council of Europe this concept has been emerging, little by little, since the adoption by the United Nations in 1948 of Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which states that "everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community." This concept seems to me to possess three facets.

First, there is no universal definition of culture. In fact, a systematic survey conducted some time ago arrived at a list of 256 different definitions. However, it is

agreed that the word "culture" bears a meaning that goes well beyond the acquisition and dissemination of the fine arts, of the refinement of taste and the spread of learning. It is worth noting that the Massey Commission, without objecting to being perceived as "commission on culture," was quite conscious of the fact that it had no authority to define culture. Nevertheless it was, inevitably, guided by the definition current at the time, which was "the development of the intelligence through the arts, letters and sciences (physical and social)." This concept is much more restrictive than those current today -- for example, culture as a "way of life," as "the collective means of expression, thought and actions of a given community," as "the attitude toward life that accompanies the civilizing process," and so on. The Canadian Commission for Unesco, faced with this problem, just this year came up with what it calls a "working definition of culture," which is this: "Culture is a dynamic value system of learned elements, with assumptions, conventions, beliefs and rules permitting members of a group to relate to each other and to the world, to communicate and to develop their creative potential." This definition is tentative and has still to be tested.

Second, it has been observed that there are two cultures: high culture and popular culture. This distinction is replete with ideological connotations, which tend to form opposing and rigid lines, especially in the performing arts. The differences show up in labels such as populism versus High Art -- which is so often identified as

aristocratic or bourgeois art and the creation and special preserve of a privileged minority. In choosing excellence, the Canada Council opted at the same time for a policy conducive to the training and improvement of individual artists and artistic companies, who were working in forms recognized as the best at the time -- those of High Art. Of course such a choice drew down upon the Council the charge of elitism. But it has also inspired a healthy breed of connoisseurs, indeed, a continuing and spirited response. For me, the existence of such criticisms merely constitutes a temptation from which I can only free myself by succumbing, as Oscar Wilde would put it. I am tempted, when I hear the charge of elitism levelled in this way, to demystify elitism by rehabilitating the elites -- I would even go so far as to say the aristocracy -- in our democratic society!

In this, I have a respectable accomplice in the philosopher Jean Lacroix. In effect, he says that democracy can only exist in a climate of spirituality. Democracy is not in opposition to the notion of aristocracy but rather in favor of applying the notion to all men. One cannot define democracy in terms of institutions, Lacroix says, no matter what their importance. To say that democracy is government "of the people by the people" does not have any concrete meaning: there are only oligarchic, or rather aristocratic, governments. Democracy makes use of oligarchies, whereas oligarchies make use of people. The problem is to find a way to bring the best people to power and, once there, to require them to maintain their excellence

and integrity. The principle of the pursuit of excellence and its concrete implications couldn't be put more succinctly: that whether it be in the realm of politics or of art and culture, the democratic spirit feeds on those qualitative values that it intends to serve and to place at the service of the whole community.

My old philosophy teachers would certainly have reproached those who seem to confuse excellence and "social class," committing the error of reducing value to the circumstances of its origin. This is a little like mathematics losing something of its dignity as a science because it owes its origins to land-measurement or trade. The Canada Council, for its part, regularly commissions Canadian musical compositions and subsidizes performers of avant-garde Canadian works. It thus avoids canonizing the so-called elitist repertoire. And although it must devote the largest part of its performing arts budget to traditional forms, it also funds experimental effort in film, video, and photography which, amusingly enough, were denigrated by aristocratic and bourgeois elites not so long ago. I should add that if the Council is thus escaping academism, it does not follow that "high art" is being transformed thereby into "popular art," in the current sense of the term. Statistics show that the audience for high art is growing steadily. And with that growth comes a reality as throbbingly evident as migraine for the arts administrator: high art constantly needs more support, while popular art makes its way more easily on its own. In a sense, the popular art of today is in the tradition of the

medieval troubadours, and it springs directly from the forms created by the protest youth culture of the last decade.

Third, to popularize, or democratize culture, it is not sufficient to make high-quality cultural "products" available. It is also necessary that people themselves participate in the process of cultural creation. In principle, the democratizing of culture should, in the end, result in a veritable "cultural democracy." The concept of cultural democracy was the subject of a recommendation, for the first time in 1972, of a Unesco Intergovernmental Conference on Cultural Policies in Europe. Some people see revolution in the idea. Still young as a scheme, cultural democracy is today only at the stage of study and experimentation. But from what I have read on the subject, it is an attempt, both worthy and difficult, to transform our traditional liberal democracies. Its success is seen as mainly dependent on a process of cultural sharing, which is regarded as the only cohesive force strong enough, in the long run, to counteract the disruptive pressures constantly threatening the unity of our society. In philosophic terms, this means that the first requirement for the common good would be to encourage the widest possible sharing of these values. Culture is thus no longer regarded as a mere complement or counterpart of economic growth and technological development; rather, it subordinates these in the name of human progress and of the dignity of the human person, both in its being and in its day to day life.

This is not the place to detail the means of action that are conceived or attempt to give some concrete shape to such a large-scale project. If I understand the full intent of cultural democracy, it could not attain its final form without a fundamental choice as to the kind of society one wants to live in. And when we speak of making such choices in the liberal democratic tradition, we immediately call to mind two basic conditions: a joining together of political power and of all the social partners, and a consensus of the people. This, needless to say, goes well beyond the mandate of the Canada Council.

I am not trying to evade the enormous challenge presented by the concept of cultural democracy, but rather to give a glimpse of its implications. This points up the boldness of the Council's youngest program, Explorations, whose name is a statement in itself. Created in March 1973, Explorations seems to me to fit logically into the schema and philosophy of cultural democracy. For the past three years, it has followed the principle of excellence beyond the traditional paths, along the byways of non-professional participation (at times) in original cultural creation -- whether in the form of books, plays, exhibitions, community animation projects, art workshops, or whatever. Because it differs from the other programs of the Council, Explorations has the dubious honor of being the favorite butt of critics. For my part, I have no trouble recognizing true excellence in this program, and I see it as a first courageous step on the arduous road toward cultural democracy.

I cannot conclude without recalling the importance of education for the pursuit of progress and excellence in a democratic society or, in other words, for the enhancement of the common good through art and culture. By educational resources I do not mean only the traditional places of education -- the family and the school -- or the people who are responsible for these institutions, the parents and teachers. I mean also all those influences, perhaps more subtle, but often more powerful -- those of the mass media, for example -- that shape future citizens.

In our era of unprecedented change, and with our inability to rid ourselves of the incubus of material poverty, I have the profound conviction that the temporal salvation of mankind is unthinkable without the awakening, or re-awakening, of the hearts and minds to the values of truth and beauty which have the unique power to transcend all things that pass away or perish. As it is so well expressed by your great countryman, Lewis Mumford, "The more hopeless our present situation seems ... the more imperative it is not to lose hope. The coming generation has still one option open, man's oldest one: that of consciously cultivating the arts that make man human."

Speech 7702

3 1761 11465381 9

